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“CITY UPON A HILL”

by Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones

Twelve years ago, on the eve of America's bi-centennial, the Harvard University sociologist Daniel Bell proclaimed "The End of American Exceptionalism." Writing in the aftermath of the fall of South Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, Bell argued in the Fall 1975 issue of the *Public Interest* that Americans no longer believed that their country was endowed with a uniquely moral role in world affairs. He concluded that "the weakening of power" and "the loss of faith in the nation's future" had turned the United States into "a nation like all other nations."

A decade later, however, reports of the death of American exceptionalism seem highly premature. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, the United States has rediscovered its faith in itself. Americans once again have begun to feel good about themselves, their country, and their role in the world. The flame of American patriotism, which dimmed and flickered after Vietnam and Watergate, is burning as brightly as ever, and not even the Iran arms scandal appears capable of weakening it again.

Most observers welcome this revival of American self-confidence, although some see it as an excess of chauvinism and even jingoism. However, little attention has been given to the content of this new patriotism and even less to the implications for U.S. foreign policy carried by the exceptionalist feeling that has accompanied it.

American exceptionalism not only celebrates the uniqueness and special virtues of the United States, but also elevates America to a higher moral plane than other countries. Exceptionalism lies at the heart of the persistent moralism preva-

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lent in American foreign policy. Exceptionalist ideas have influenced American foreign policy throughout U.S. history, but the consequences have varied greatly. Ironically, exceptionalism can stimulate both crusading interventionism and complacent withdrawal from world affairs. The sense of moral superiority on which exceptionalism is based and the attendant American determination to spread American ideals around the world have justified all manner of U.S. involvements in foreign affairs. But this same sense of superiority has also sometimes given Americans an excuse to remain smug and content in an isolationist cocoon, well protected from "corrupt" or "inferior" foreigners.

Clearly, there is much to applaud in America's recovery of self-confidence. History amply justifies the view that much of the American experience has been unique and that America has done a great deal of good throughout the world. But the moralistic revival that has accompanied exceptionalism's return does not necessarily augur well for U.S. foreign policy—especially the version trumpeted by Reagan, the pre-eminent voice of exceptionalism today. The Iran fiasco notwithstanding, Reagan's moralistic vision of America's world role seems solidly entrenched in the country's psyche for some time to come. And though his often repeated claim that the United States is "the last best hope of man on earth" makes Americans feel good about themselves, it hardly fosters increased public understanding of international issues and America's role in confronting them.

Exceptionalist beliefs are not confined to the United States. Great powers have long depicted their actions as unique examples of altruism. During the Peloponnesian War, Pericles told his fellow Athenians that "we alone do good to our neighbors not upon a calculation of interest, but in the confidence of freedom and in a frank fearless spirit." The French feel intense pride and glory in their country's very existence, and the British once felt duty-bound to "civilize" the rest of the world.

But American exceptionalism stands out for two reasons. First, Americans lack a common ethnic or linguistic heritage and therefore tend to construct a national identity out of beliefs in their own uniqueness. Second, America was deliber-

ately founded as a nation unlike any other. Unlike great powers that adopted exceptionalist visions to justify their acquisition and maintenance of empires, the United States celebrated its unique virtues long before achieving world prominence. Early colonial settlers and the Founding Fathers who declared independence from Great Britain saw America occupying a separate moral category from the rest of the world. American institutions were held to be unique, and America's relations with the world were to reject the old principles and practices of international politics.

Belief in America's uniqueness is deeply rooted in U.S. history. The colonists found a virgin land that could be shaped in accordance with their ideals. They justified their emigration from Europe in grandiloquent terms as well. The founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony sharply differentiated America from the Old World, proclaiming that "this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new earth in new Churches, and a new Commonwealth together." Massachusetts Bay Governor John Winthrop declared in 1630 that "wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us."¹

The Puritans' religious vision fused with the faith in reason, progress, and man's perfectibility characteristic of the Enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson and others took Lockean liberalism as their starting point instead of Calvinist theology. But they all concluded that America was a "separated" nation where mankind could make a new beginning.

These beliefs in America's uniqueness—particularly beliefs in its unique virtue or innocence—must be distinguished from the concept of exceptionalism developed by historians and social scientists attempting to explain the country's distinctive political development.² The two are, of course, related, but beliefs sometimes take on a life of their own. In addition, some empirical

¹Quoted in Richard Barnett, *Roots of War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 251; quoted in Loren Baritz, *City on a Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), 3.

²Classic works of this type include: Lewis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), and Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

basis exists for beliefs in American exceptionalism. The United States has a distinctive geographic position and vast natural resources that have shaped a unique history. For many years, the American democratic system contrasted sharply with European governments and may still, although to a lesser extent. Moreover, the United States remains one of a handful of democracies in a world full of various kinds of dictatorships. In addition, few other countries are home to such a diverse group of immigrants and their descendants.

But American exceptionalism—particularly on a moral level—is even more important as a matter of faith. As the journalist and scholar Max Lerner observed in *America as a Civilization* (1957), “Americans have tended to find their religious faith in various forms of belief about their own existence as a people.” Even as the conditions that grounded exceptionalist beliefs in reality have eroded, the belief itself has endured in America. American exceptionalism has become a public myth that provides a philosophical foundation for debates on specific policies, including U.S. foreign policy.

The flame of American patriotism is burning as brightly as ever, and not even the Iran arms scandal appears capable of weakening it again.

Americans’ sense of exceptionalism has produced two general feelings about U.S. foreign policy: first, that the United States has a unique role—a mission—in the world, and second, that American foreign policy is necessarily more virtuous and altruistic than that of other states. The sense of mission is expressed both in declarations that the United States must convert the world to its values by serving as an example and in a more activist crusading spirit. Like the idea of exceptionalism itself, the sense of mission can be traced to colonial America and the Founding Fathers. The New England Puritans felt that they had embarked on a “mission of cosmic significance” and that they would provide a “moral example to all the world.” Even the sober John Adams ambitiously ventured that the United

States “will last forever, govern the globe and introduce the perfection of man.”³ He did not, unfortunately, leave specific instructions for his successors. These two tenets of American exceptionalism have combined to form yet another conclusion about American foreign policy: It is exceptional and cannot be judged by the standards applied to other countries.

Since the colonial era, exceptionalism has convinced Americans that the United States, as a democracy that aspires to the moral regeneration of humanity, could escape the necessities of realpolitik and international strife that plagued Europe’s monarchies. Exemplifying what has been called the liberal approach to international relations, Americans attributed war to the existence of political systems that excluded the people—who were assumed to be peace loving—from the making of foreign policy.⁴

These exceptionalist ideas profoundly influenced American foreign policy for the next two centuries. In the 19th century, beliefs in exceptionalism were linked to U.S. withdrawal from the power politics of aristocratic European states. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 not only warned other states to keep out of the Western Hemisphere, but also reaffirmed the distinction between the young American republic and the old monarchies of Europe. The doctrine “is an ideological tract, praising the democratic principle and exalting democratic forms, in contrast to the monarchies of Europe,” wrote the historian Dexter Perkins in *The American Approach to Foreign Policy* (1962). Manifest Destiny, another form of the belief in Americans’ unique virtue, justified a westward expansion that itself was taken as evidence that America was favored and protected by Providence.

Twentieth-century exceptionalism has fueled both interventionism and isolationism. President Woodrow Wilson argued that staying out of World War I would permit the United States to retain its purity and to provide a positive moral example to all the world. Yet when neutrality proved impossible and the United States entered the war, exceptionalism was applied to a completely different purpose. Instead of justifying

³Quoted in *Barnet, Roots of War*, 251.

⁴See Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1986): 1151–1169.

aloofness, it provided the motivation for a great crusade to destroy democracy's enemies and to create a world in which American-inspired peace could flourish. Wilson claimed that "all the world believes in America as it believes in no other nation organized in the modern world. . . . America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world." But World War I's carnage and the ensuing troubled peace process confirmed Americans' worst fears about corrupt and reprehensible European power politics and reinforced an indigenous sense of moral superiority. Consequently, Congress and the American people were not prepared to take such a drastic plunge into internationalism, and they rejected Wilson's ambitious plans for the postwar world.

When the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 finally drew the United States into World War II, however, the country again adopted a messianic view of its mission. In his annual message to Congress on January 6, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt stated: "We are fighting today for security, for progress, and for peace, not only for ourselves but for all men, not only for one generation but for all generations. We are fighting to cleanse the world of ancient evils, ancient ills." Given the nature of Nazi Germany, Roosevelt's claims may not have been far from the truth, but similar arguments probably would have been offered even if the United States had been fighting only Japan.

After World War II, U.S. policymakers self-consciously attempted to avoid the mistakes of the interwar period. Bolstered by undeniable economic and military strength, they established an important foreign-policy consensus in favor of an activist role for America. Again exceptionalism provided a key rationale. President Harry Truman said that his foreign policy aimed to see whether the Sermon on the Mount could be put into effect. The late Republican senator from Michigan Arthur Vandenberg, when he was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, contended that "ours must be the world's moral leadership." And the American people seemed to agree. During the late 1940s, surveys by the Social Science Research Council and *Fortune* magazine showed that most Americans believed that the United States was doing what was

best for a bad world. The exceptionalist attitudes prevalent in the early cold war peaked during the 1960s. President John Kennedy's inaugural vow to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty" represented the full flowering of the missionary aspect of American exceptionalism.

Americans Lose Faith

The unfortunate culmination of this sweeping commitment, however, came in Vietnam. U.S. intervention was portrayed initially as another attempt to defend liberty, but America's support for an autocratic government in Saigon and the actual course of the war seemed to demonstrate that America was no more altruistic than earlier imperial powers. The sharp distinction between good and evil, always an important component of American exceptionalism, became blurred in Indochina. America's involvement in Vietnam delivered the apparent deathblow to the myth of American exceptionalism, as well as to much of the post-World War II foreign-policy consensus. Events such as the massacre at My Lai and the bombing of Hanoi and Cambodia cast a dark shadow on American claims to exceptional virtue in world affairs. As early as 1966, in *The Arrogance of Power*, then Senator William Fulbright wrote that "power confuses itself with virtue" in U.S. foreign policy.

Further, just as the idea of an exceptionalist American foreign policy was eroding in Vietnam, American domestic institutions began to prove vulnerable to the weaknesses and internal disease that exceptionalism had hitherto associated only with other countries. The realization that poverty and racism still existed in the midst of the affluent society, as well as urban violence, student unrest, Watergate, and reports of domestic spying by the CIA, helped precipitate a tremendous crisis of faith and pride among Americans. By the mid-1970s, numerous polls indicated that Americans had lost faith in their own governmental institutions.

The belief in American exceptionalism reached its nadir as the Vietnam conflict ended. Bell was hardly alone in concluding that Americans had abandoned their traditional belief that the United States is "the most generous and re-

sponsible nation in the world." The Cornell University political scientist Richard Rosecrance titled a 1979 book *America as an Ordinary Country*, a phrase unthinkable several decades earlier.⁵

The more radical critiques of U.S. foreign policy that emerged during the Vietnam War actually inverted the theory of American exceptionalism in foreign policy. Writers such as Gabriel Kolko concluded that the United States had played not an exceptionally good but an exceptionally evil role on the world stage throughout much of its history.

Former President Jimmy Carter began his term with an effort to restore America's belief in itself and to reinvigorate the dying idea of a special American mission in the world. Promising America a foreign policy "as good as its people," and pledging "to regain the moral stature we once had," Carter adopted the grandiose rhetoric of an earlier day and proclaimed that "our policy is designed to serve mankind." His inaugural address was laden with self-conscious invocations of American exceptionalism. He argued that by defining "itself in terms of both spirituality and human liberty," America had acquired a "unique self-definition which has given us an exceptional appeal," and affirmed that "we are a proudly idealistic nation."⁶

Carter's efforts began the process of restoring Americans' faith in their institutions and society. But the consequences of such a restoration for foreign policy were mixed at best. Declarations of U.S. support for human rights, the most visible and significant element of Carter's program of moral reconstruction, may have impressed domestic audiences, but they struck many foreign observers as arrogant assertions of U.S. moral superiority. Moreover, the human rights campaign was never integrated into a coherent and consistent policy toward Iran, Nicaragua, South Korea, and many other countries. Inconsistency seemed particularly apparent in U.S.-Soviet re-

⁵Richard Rosecrance, ed., *America as an Ordinary Country* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979).

⁶Jimmy Carter, *A Government as Good as Its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977); *Address at Commencement Exercises, University of Notre Dame, 22 May 1977*, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977* (Washington, D.C.: GPO 1977), 1: 958, 962; *Public Papers of the Presidents: Jimmy Carter, 1977* 1: 1, 3.

lations early in Carter's term, when human rights attacks on the Soviet Union were launched side by side with vigorous efforts to negotiate the SALT II Treaty and with an attempt to play down an "inordinate fear of communism." The overthrow of Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi of Iran, the ensuing hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan contributed to an impression of American impotence and incompetence that ultimately overshadowed Carter's efforts to reassert a vision of an exceptionally virtuous America in world affairs. Carter himself undermined his revival of America's faith in itself by proclaiming his discovery of a deep malaise among the American people.

Reagan inherited Carter's vision of a virtuous American foreign policy, embellished it with numerous rhetorical flourishes, and combined it with an image of strength and confidence. Most important, he effectively communicated his vision to the American people. Reagan has spoken of the United States as a "nation of destiny" and has resurrected the early colonial idea of America as a "shining city on a hill." He has even attempted to undo Vietnam's damage to the exceptionalist myth by calling that conflict "a noble cause."⁷

Reagan's speeches recapture all the ebullient optimism of the Founding Fathers and the messianic idealism of Wilson. In a 1983 address to a group of evangelical Christians in Orlando, Florida, the president quoted Thomas Paine's claim that "we have it within our power to begin the world over again." And he has directly countered the revisionist inversion of exceptionalism by arguing, as the *New York Times* reported on August 24, 1984, that "America is the most peaceful, least warlike nation in modern history. We are not the cause of all the ills of the world."

Simplicity explains much of the success that Reagan's foreign policy has enjoyed. The president's rhetoric has focused on a familiar and accessible theme: the contrast between a free, virtuous America and a communist, evil Soviet Union. This Calvinist approach to foreign affairs has succeeded in that it has helped resurrect an easily understood post-World War II interpretation of foreign affairs. Reagan's 1983 charge that the Soviet Union is "the focus of evil" in the

⁷New York Times, 19 August 1980, 1.

world enabled Americans once again to feel as though they could understand international events and American foreign policy. And the constant and unequivocating way in which Reagan has articulated these themes over the years has endowed them with additional legitimacy.

The president's aides and congressional Republicans have consistently used exceptionalist rhetoric as well. Nowhere was this more evident than at the 1984 Republican National Convention. In the most important foreign-policy address, Jeane Kirkpatrick, then the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, credited Reagan with restoring "confidence in the American experience. . . . Confidence in the decency of the American people. And confidence in the relevance of our experience to the rest of the world."

Consequently, exceptionalist ideas have dominated and shaped the political and foreign-policy landscapes during the Reagan years. The president's messianic calls for a "crusade for Freedom" eventually produced the Reagan Doctrine—U.S. efforts to spread democracy through support of anticommunist guerrilla movements in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. Beliefs in American uniqueness and moral superiority are also evident in the debate over "moral equivalence"—the controversy over how the U.S. and Soviet foreign-policy records stack up morally.

Throughout the Reagan era, his neoconservative supporters have cheered and encouraged the president's emphasis on America's exceptional virtue. In the Fall 1985 issue of the *National Interest*, Irving Kristol stressed that U.S. foreign policy must have a "significant ideological dimension" centered on "the American way of life." And in a series of articles in the *New Republic*, Charles Krauthammer has called for "a new Wilsonianism."⁸ But much more important, this rhetorical emphasis on American exceptionalism has been reflected in public attitudes. A 1983 Roper poll found that 81 per cent of Americans believe the United States has a "special

⁸See his "Isolationism, Left and Right," *New Republic*, 4 March 1985, 25; "The Poverty of Realism," *New Republic*, 17 February 1986, 14–22; and "Morality and the Reagan Doctrine," *New Republic*, 8 September 1986, 17–24.

role" in the world, whereas only 14 per cent see it as being like other countries.⁹

Reagan-era exceptionalism has been powerfully reinforced by the images and events of recent history. Even though many perceived the Iran hostage crisis as a national humiliation, they also saw that America could be the victim—not the perpetrator—of injustice, thus countering the post-Vietnam inversion of exceptionalism. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the downing of a South Korean passenger airliner dispelled most lingering beliefs that the United States had a monopoly on malice in the world and boosted Reagan's "focus of evil" charges, buttressing the moralistic world view that goes hand in hand with exceptionalism.

America's involvement in Lebanon from 1982 to 1984 produced little more than the tragic death of more than 250 U.S. Marines and a foreign-policy disaster for the Reagan administration. But on a symbolic level it reinforced the central myth of American exceptionalism: The American public saw U.S. forces that had been sent on a "peace-keeping" mission to a country rent by strife attacked and killed by ungrateful and fanatical foreigners. The intervention in Grenada can be interpreted similarly. There, too, American forces were used to bring peace and freedom to a chaotic foreign land—only this time the effort succeeded.

America's image as the virtuous savior of a corrupt world pervades popular culture as well. In the second Rambo film, the actor Sylvester Stallone enabled American power finally to triumph in Vietnam. *Rocky IV*, another Stallone box office hit, gave viewers the U.S.-Soviet conflict in the form of a boxing bout between Rocky Balboa—all-American hero—and Ivan Drago—Soviet automaton. Along with real-world events and images, these celluloid fables fuel the moralistic public mood that Reagan apparently is attempting to foster.

Implications of Exceptionalism

Reagan's appeals to Americans' exceptionalist yearnings doubtless contributed to his electoral success and popularity before the Iran arms

⁹Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 362.

scandal. The president has an unmatched ability to reach the American people by articulating themes that make them feel comfortable and secure. He instinctively understands what Americans respond to, and his emphasis on the symbols and images of an exceptional America may help explain why his foreign policy as a whole has been far more popular than many of his stands on particular issues.¹⁰ But using the "bully pulpit" of the presidency to revive exceptionalist beliefs may not be good for U.S. foreign policy.

Some observers may regard Reagan's revival of American exceptionalist rhetoric as irrelevant to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. But when foreign policy is pursued by a democracy, ideas and public attitudes do matter. Even if some of Reagan's foreign-policy advisers do not accept his entire vision of American exceptionalism, public expectations shaped by the Great Communicator will continue to influence U.S. foreign policy for years to come. His popularity with young people—who remember only two presidents and prefer Reagan—alone supports predictions of enduring influence. Reagan has sometimes been likened to Charles de Gaulle, who transformed the politics of France. Like his French counterpart, Reagan perhaps has been so skilled at moving his country's psyche that the emotions unleashed will live on even if their creator himself becomes mired in scandal or fiasco.

The problem with American exceptionalism, however, is that, although it can provide the foundation for either messianism or isolationism, it does not serve well as a basis for a policy of sustained and realistic involvement in world affairs. And this is precisely the sort of policy needed today by an America that is no longer exceptional in terms of geographic isolation or overwhelming relative power. Patriotism, pride in American principles, and moral vision are all ideals fundamental to American self-identity, and thus they are necessary building blocks for any successful foreign policy. But moral vision can exist without moral arrogance, and pride and patriotism can exist without paternalism. If Americans place their country on a pedestal, they give themselves two logical policy choices: They must

¹⁰See Terry L. Deibel, "Why Reagan Is Strong," *FOREIGN POLICY* 62 (Spring 1986): 108–125.

either preserve America's innocence by shunning involvement with corrupt foreign countries and their sordid, hopeless quarrels, or attempt to reconstruct the world in America's own image.¹¹

American exceptionalism thus provides the context for the cycles of inward and outward orientation widely observed in U.S. foreign policy. A renewal of beliefs in America's uniqueness could therefore produce a revival of foreign-policy oscillations. In an era of unstable mass public coalitions and widening ideological cleavages among the foreign-policy elite, such fluctuations could occur even more rapidly, further undermining perceptions of American credibility, reliability, and predictability abroad. Recent U.S. foreign policy already betrays this pattern.

The potential of exceptionalist attitudes to justify U.S. isolation as well as activism is something that the Reagan administration needs to consider more carefully. In adopting the foreign-policy rhetoric generally associated with Democratic presidents such as Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, Reagan and his fellow Republicans have, at least verbally, abandoned the cautious realism—and at times even isolationism—that over the years has characterized the party's approach to foreign policy. Just like leaders who have always sought a global or imperial role for their countries, they have relied on the grandiose exceptionalist language most often associated with foreign-policy activism and even crusading interventionism.

But given the dualistic nature of American exceptionalism, this rhetoric may have the opposite effect. For the immediate future, a resurgence of American exceptionalism seems more likely to pave the way for more introverted policies. There are few signs that the activist spirit that prevailed between the declaration of the Truman Doctrine and the middle of the Vietnam War is about to be resurrected. According to the public-opinion specialist William Schneider, surveys "show no evidence of any resurgence of crusading interventionism" that might be associated with messianic exceptionalism. Only in response to a Soviet invasion of Western Europe or Japan

¹¹For an excellent discussion of this point, see Richard Ullman, "The 'Foreign World' and Ourselves: Washington, Wilson, and the Democrat's Dilemma," *FOREIGN POLICY* 21 (Winter 1975-76): 99-124.

is a majority of the American people willing to commit U.S. troops abroad. Surveys consistently show that two-thirds or more of the American public oppose sending U.S. troops to fight in Central America. More generally, by a margin of 53 per cent to 22 per cent, Americans believe that U.S. security would be enhanced if the United States no longer attempted to prevent the spread of communism.¹²

Using the “bully pulpit” of the presidency to revive exceptionalist beliefs may not be good for U.S. foreign policy.

The public seems to include an increasing proportion—perhaps more than a majority—of noninternationalists who “feel that most of what the United States does for the rest of the world is senseless, wasteful, and unappreciated.” Although unlikely to return the United States to the isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s, this sentiment offers but a shaky foundation for a renewed era of global activism. Secretary of State George Shultz may believe that “the United States will fulfill the role that history has assigned to us” by assuming global responsibilities for the protection of peace, but invoking beliefs in American exceptionalism may enable Americans to overcome any lingering sense of guilt over Vietnam while encouraging complacent noninvolvement in world affairs. Indeed, more than one-third of the public now feels that the United States should stay out of world affairs.¹³

Many of Reagan’s supporters argue that the moral rhetoric associated with a belief in American exceptionalism is necessary to build public support for the Reagan Doctrine. Even those who do not embrace the Reagan Doctrine have

¹²William Schneider, “Conservatism, Not Interventionism: Trends in Foreign Policy Opinion, 1974–1982,” in Eagle Defiant, ed. Kenneth Oye, Robert Lieber, and Donald Rothchild (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), 57–58; John E. Rielly, “American Opinion: Continuity, Not Reaganism,” FOREIGN POLICY 50 (Spring 1983): 99; Daniel Yankelovich and John Doble, “The Public Mood,” Foreign Affairs 63, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 45.

¹³Schneider, “Public Opinion,” in The Making of America’s Soviet Policy, ed. Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 20; New York Times, 10 December 1984, A11; Rielly, “American Opinion,” 91.

suggested that "no foreign policy can gain the American people's support unless it reflects their deeper values"—as former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance put it in "The Human Rights Imperative," in the Summer 1986 issue of FOREIGN POLICY.

But the Reagan Doctrine provides one example of where rhetoric that emphasizes America's unique virtues and mission is most likely to backfire and generate disillusionment. Messianic calls to spread democracy are likely to generate popular expectations that will not be fulfilled. Even if they are successful in overthrowing communist regimes, the guerrilla movements backed under the aegis of the Reagan Doctrine are unlikely to establish Western-style democracies. And it remains doubtful whether any of the guerrilla groups can succeed, even with significant U.S. support. Moreover, the gap between the doctrine's messianism and the illegal or immoral means used to implement it—such as the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and atrocities committed by the Nicaraguan rebels known as *contras*—will foster perceptions of hypocrisy at home and abroad. As Thomas Hughes, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pointed out in "The Twilight of Internationalism," in the Winter 1985-86 issue of FOREIGN POLICY, it is ironic that the language of American exceptionalism, which was once associated with support for the liberal internationalist ideals of international law, international organization, and multilateralism, is now invoked to justify defiance of the International Court of Justice, unilateralism, and narrow nationalism.

Even if an upsurge of American exceptionalism does not lead to isolationism, it may encourage unilateralism in U.S. foreign relations. This trend is already evident in the debate over maritime and continental military strategies, the denigration of the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, and the growing tendency of the United States to act independently of its West European allies, whether in Grenada or in its policy toward the Soviet Union. In economics, exceptionalism can lead to protectionism, much as high tariff barriers accompanied political isolation in the 1920s and 1930s. Perceptions of Japanese ingratitude for U.S. military support may be linked with increasing calls

for protecting U.S. industries from Japanese imports. Even the emphasis on a strategic defense system—to the extent that it encourages thinking about a high-technology “fortress America”—may be viewed as evidence of this unsettling trend.

Exceptionalism also poses practical problems for U.S. dealings with other countries. If Americans regard themselves as morally superior to the rest of the world, they can regard any criticisms only as unfounded and malicious. The London *Sunday Telegraph* observed in 1984 that in its present “ebullient state of mind, the United States tends to be equally impatient of criticism from friend or foe.” International clashes of interest may be transformed into a conflict of good against evil when viewed through the prism of exceptionalism. This tendency is pervasive in U.S.-Soviet relations, where Reagan’s beliefs in America’s moral superiority underlie his ideological offensive against the USSR. Reagan himself has asked: “How do you compromise between good and evil? . . . How do you compromise with men who say . . . there is no God?”¹⁴ Such an approach to U.S.-Soviet relations may reduce the prospects for mutually beneficial agreements that could decrease the risks of superpower competition.

In fact, the vigorous U.S. rejection of moral equivalence is likely to divide the United States and Western Europe. Although there is definitely a moral difference between the superpowers, most American criticisms of contrary West European arguments imply that the United States occupies a morally exceptional position with regard to its allies, too. Such claims, often accompanied by complaints about the pacifism or anti-Americanism of West European elites, are understandably resented. Responses to allied claims of moral equivalence between the superpowers should instead emphasize the values and political traditions that the United States and Western Europe share. NATO cohesion would be far better served by a focus on Western democratic principles than by a focus on strictly exceptional American ones.

Defenders of the Reagan administration’s handling of U.S.–West European relations may

¹⁴Quoted in George W. Ball, “The War for Star Wars,” *New York Review of Books*, 11 April 1985, 38.

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argue that the European members of NATO are not disgruntled and that they actually welcome such vigorous American leadership. But an America that loudly proclaims its exceptional virtue and implicitly denigrates Western Europe is not likely to appeal to the next generation of Europeans. As numerous observers have noted, European political predispositions and attitudes toward the United States break down along generational lines: older individuals whose ideas were shaped by World War II and who feel a commitment toward the United States, versus a younger generation with no firsthand understanding of the war and much less sympathy toward the United States. The latter generation, which may soon be the predominant force in West European politics, already aggressively questions America's moral claims and—especially in West Germany—tends to see the superpowers as morally indistinguishable. As there is no guarantee that the major NATO states will be governed indefinitely by conservative political parties, maintaining stable U.S.–West European relations in the future may well depend on America's ability to be open-minded and flexible—qualities hardly fostered by excessive beliefs in American exceptionalism.

Ironically, the resurgent American exceptionalism does not direct its implicit or explicit criticisms of foreign countries solely at Western Europe. Beliefs in American exceptionalism have traditionally rested on the sharp distinction between the “old world” of Europe and the “new world” of the United States. This dichotomy remains an aspect of exceptionalism, accentuated by American resentment over Western Europe's apparent status as a free rider, but its importance is waning with Europe's decline as the key theater in world affairs and the emergence of new elites in the United States that do not share the Europeanist orientation of the old establishment. But nowadays an at least equally sharp distinction is drawn between the United States and Third World countries. Once viewed as newly independent republics that might emulate the United States, developing countries now have a tarnished image thanks to the Iran hostage crisis, events in Lebanon, the aftermath of Vietnamese unification and the Cambodian revolution, and numerous human rights violations. To many, the

corruption and even sheer savagery evident in many Third World states vindicates the exceptionalist vision of a uniquely virtuous America.

No country—and particularly not the United States—could conduct a successful foreign policy if it viewed itself as a fundamentally evil influence on the world. Beliefs in America's moral virtue provide a far better basis for foreign policy than agonizing self-doubt over America's international role. Nevertheless, celebrating America's uniqueness cannot alone underpin America's foreign relations.

Exceptionalist attitudes militate against a realistic and prudent foreign policy that attempts to use diplomacy to advance American interests and confront international problems. When the public is encouraged to think in strictly exceptionalist terms, leaders will be tempted to manipulate U.S. relations with the rest of the world to produce purely symbolic reaffirmations of America's self-image. As a result, successful policies may be increasingly defined simply as those that make Americans feel good about their country. The need to confront potential threats to U.S. security or to offer solutions to international problems could be slighted or forgotten completely. It will always seem easier to offer rhetorical reaffirmations of America's essential goodness than to build public support for sustained negotiations on complex and controversial issues. Exceptionalism run amuck could reduce U.S. foreign relations to rhetorical calls for uplifting the world or attempts to avoid and ignore it, rather than lead to a concerted effort to understand and accept or realistically change it. Americans who oppose and fear a new wave of military interventionism will naturally suspect the messianic overtones of Reagan's exceptionalist rhetoric and will call for a less "ideological" approach to foreign affairs. But Republican realists who favor policies such as increased military spending and a universal containment of Soviet advances should also have reservations about repeated invocations of a moral vision once associated almost entirely with the Democratic party. Basing foreign policy on assertions of American exceptionalism when public opinion contains a significant noninternationalist strain could ultimately lead to a retreat from necessary U.S. involvement in world affairs—a retreat made

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easier by the public's smug satisfaction that the United States would retain its moral superiority. At the very least, an upsurge of moralism could shift the terms of foreign-policy debates away from discussion of matching U.S. power to commitments and defining U.S. vital interests. How ironic if the Republican party, which once put itself forward as the party of realism, were to abandon an emphasis on prudent balance-of-power policies in its haste to embrace and emulate Reagan's exceptionalist vision.

Exceptionalist beliefs and attitudes always will influence America's dealings with the rest of the world. Since the Vietnam War, Americans seem to need to hear periodic reaffirmations of American exceptionalism. Deeply ingrained myths cannot easily be expunged from the American psyche. But neither should they be fostered for short-term domestic political advantage. Idealistic visions can indeed help justify policies pursued on the grounds of realistic self-interest, provided they are not carried to extremes. Prudence and pragmatism must remain at the heart of foreign-policy formulation. Presidents should play a role in attempting to lay the basis for a U.S. foreign policy of sustained internationalism without using the crutch of exceptionalist visions that win popular support but little else.

The challenge American leaders face in the late 1980s is to use American exceptionalist attitudes to maintain support for constructive U.S. involvement in the world. Today's excessive exceptionalism must be tempered by a greater effort to educate the public on the complexities of foreign-policy issues. Presidential rhetoric fashioned to promote simple beliefs in American uniqueness and innocence can only produce unrealistic expectations and further confusion in U.S. foreign policy in the long run.